Self Expression is Overrated: Better Constraints Make Better Participatory Experiences

I've had it with museums' obsession with open-ended self-expression. I know this sounds strange coming from someone writing an admittedly self-expressive blog post, but hear me out.

When I talk about designing participatory experiences, I often show the above graphic from Forrester Research. Forrester created the "social technographics" profile tool to help businesses understand the way different audiences engage with social media (and you can read more of my thoughts on it here). The point, in the context of this conversation, is that a minority of social media users are creators—people who write blog posts, upload photos onto Flickr, or share homemade videos on YouTube. There are so many more people who

join social networks, who collect and aggregate favored content, and critique and rate books and movies. These are all active social endeavors that contribute positive value to the social Web.

And yet many museums are fixated on creators. I show the tool and then they say, "yeah, but we really want people to share their own stories about fly-swatters," or, "we think our visitors can make amazing videos about justice." Museums see open-ended self-expression as the be-all of participatory experiences. Allowing visitors to select their favorite exhibits in a gallery or comment on the content of the labels isn't seen as valuable a participatory learning experience as producing their own content.

This is a problem for two reasons. First, exhibits that invite self-expression appeal to a tiny percentage of museum audiences. Less than 1% of the users of most social Web platform create original content. Would you design an interactive exhibit that only 1% of visitors would want to use? Maybe—but only if it was complemented by other exhibits with wider appeal.

Second, open-ended self-expression requires self-directed creativity. You have to have an idea of what you'd like to say, and then you have to say it in a way that satisfies your expectations of quality. In other words, it's hard, and it's especially hard on the spot in the context of a casual museum visit. What if I assigned you to make a video of your ideas about justice? Does that sound like a fun and rewarding casual activity to you?

If your goal is to invite visitors to share their own experience in a way that celebrates and respects their unique contribution to the institution, you need to design more constraints, not fewer, on visitor self-expression.

Consider a mural. If given the chance, only a very small percentage of people would opt to paint a mural on their own. The materials are not the barrier—the ideas and the confidence are. You have to have an idea of what you want to paint and how to do it. But imagine being invited to participate in the creation of a mural. You are handed a pre-mixed color and a brush and a set of instructions. It's easy. You get to contribute to a collaborative project that produces something beautiful. You see the overall value of the project. You can point to your part in its making with pride. You have been elevated by the opportunity to contribute to the project.

This experience is shared by folks who contribute data to Citizen Science projects, nominate concepts for MN150, or perform research on the children of the Lodz ghetto.

Visitors are not building exhibits from scratch or designing their own science experiments. Instead, they are participating in larger projects, joining the team, doing their part. There are often opportunities for partial self-expression—a flourishing brush stroke here, a witty Facebook status update there—but the overall expressive element is tightly constrained by the participatory platform at hand.

Why aren't more museums designing highly constrained participatory platforms in which visitors contribute to collaborative projects? The misguided answer is that we think it's more respectful to allow visitors to do their own thing, that their ultimate learning experience will come from unfettered self-expression. But that's mostly born from laziness and a misunderstanding of what motivates participation. It's easy for museums to assign a corner and a kiosk to visitors and say, "we'll put their stories over there." It's harder to design an experience that leverages many visitors' expression and puts their contributions to meaningful use. It's like cooking. If you have a bunch of novice friends, it can be maddening to find appropriate "sous chef" roles for them to fill. Many cooks prefer just to get those clumsy hands out of the kitchen. It takes a special kind of cook, artist, or scientist to want to support the contributions of novices. It takes people who want to be educators, not just executors.

Museum staff should be those special kind of people. We should respect visitors enough to engage them in work that we actually value, to find in-roads that support their participation. We should care enough about their potential usefulness to find the right job for them to do. When I worked with teens on media pieces for an exhibit on black holes, they always wanted to know where their media projects would be featured in the exhibition and what the specific criteria were for success. The client kept saying, "do whatever you want," which they thought meant, "we support your unique self-expression." But the teens heard, "Do whatever you want—we don't really care what it is." The teens wanted the constraints, both so they could be good contributors and to put some limits on the vast openness of "whatever."

We should support the rare visitors who have something unique to share. But we should also consider the vastly greater number of people who are waiting for us to give them a brush and tell them where to paint.

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